

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

PAINTING YOURSELF INTO A CORNER: TRUMAN
AND THE DECISION TO GO TO WAR, JUNE 1950

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: Painting Yourself Into A Corner: Truman And The Decision To Go To War, June 1950

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In June 1950, President Truman committed the United States to the defense of South Korea. Hailed as a brave and decisive move, Truman's decision rested on an uncertain assumption: that the U.S. military was capable of coming to Korea's defense. This assumption was tested immediately and fared poorly: the first U.S. ground unit in combat in Korea, Task Force Smith, engaged the North Koreans and was promptly chewed up. Rather than inspire confidence, the rout of Task Force Smith caused panic. The fate of Task Force Smith so traumatized the Army that even today junior officers are taught that there will be "No more 'Task Force Smiths'!" But why was there a "Task Force Smith" in the first place? Using a "policy formulation model" developed at the U.S. Army War College, this paper will examine events, circumstances, assumptions, and decisions that shaped the military's ability to answer Truman's summons. The paper will show that the military was increasingly constrained by budget and doctrinal decisions following World War II so that it was unable to offer Truman any options. Seen through the lens of the model, the debacle we now know of as "Task Force Smith" appears to have been inevitable.

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PAINTING YOURSELF INTO A CORNER: TRUMAN AND THE DECISION TO GO TO WAR, JUNE 1950

In late June 1950, President Harry S. Truman committed the United States to the defense of South Korea. Hailed as a brave and decisive move by much of the American public, our allies overseas, and even his critics in Congress¹, Truman's decision rested on an uncertain assumption: that the U.S. military was capable of coming to Korea's defense. In fact, neither General Douglas MacArthur (Commander, Far East Command (FEC)), nor the Joint Staff had a contingency plan for Korea. And while MacArthur nominally had four ground divisions available in Japan for his use, they were woefully undermanned, under-equipped, and under-trained. Once U.S. ground forces were committed, Truman's assumption was tested almost immediately and fared poorly: "Task Force Smith," a battalion-sized, infantry unit from the Army's 24th Infantry Division, engaged North Korean units twenty miles south of Seoul and was promptly chewed up. Rather than inspire confidence, the rout of Task Force Smith caused widespread panic among allied units on the battlefield, in the U.S. FEC headquarters in Japan, and even in Washington. It would be months before the situation on the Korean peninsula stabilized and President Truman could breathe a bit more easily. The fate of Task Force Smith so traumatized the Army that even today junior officers are taught that there will be "No more 'Task Force Smiths'!" But why was there a "Task Force Smith" in the first place?

To answer this question, a "policy formulation model" currently under development at the U.S. Army War College will be used. The model, which starts off with a policy question to be answered (in this case, "How should the United States respond to an attack on South Korea?"), provides a structure that we can use to examine in an orderly fashion the various events, circumstances, assumptions, and decisions that shaped the U.S. military's answer to Truman's request for options and its ability to answer the "summons of the trumpet." We will see that the military was increasingly constrained by fiscal, political, and doctrinal decisions in the years between World War II and the Korean War. This continued to the degree that the military was unable to offer Truman any real options once he had committed the U.S. to the fight.

THE "NSPP POLICY FORMULATION MODEL"²

Developed as a consequence of his years serving in policy-making positions, Colonel Alan G. Stolberg of the U.S. Army War College has advanced a model of policy formulation that serves as a reasonably comprehensive checklist for the policy practitioner. The model, depicted in Table 1, takes the user from a point where an issue is defined to a concluding point where feedback is received and the proposed policy is amended as required. The model is quite straightforward and has the advantage of capturing the essential steps practitioners must follow

if they are to provide intelligent recommendations to their seniors. It is an extraordinarily handy tool. But this policy formulation model is not only a good tool for crafting competent policy options, it is also a good tool for pointing out the errors of the practitioner. Korea in June 1950 is one such example.

THE NSPP POLICY FORMULATION MODEL	
1. Define the issue	Determine the question that requires a policy response.
2. Strategic context	360° review: identify existing, broad U.S. policies and strategies that your policy must be in support of/in compliance with.
3. Assumptions & constraints for policy development	Understand your leadership's guidance to include resource considerations.
4. Identify U.S. national interests; identify U.S. domestic, political considerations	
5. Determine the desired "Strategic Endstate"	Answer, at the strategic level, to Step #1.
6. Determine the desired "Operational Endstate"	Answer, at the operational level, to Step #1.
7. Identify possible policy options	Develop a spectrum of policy options that have the ability to achieve the desired strategic endstate.
8. Conduct an analysis of each identified policy option	Is the policy recommendation feasible? Acceptable? Suitable?
9. Develop a risk assessment for each policy option	Attempt to capture potential 2d- and 3d-order effects. Who or what are the potential "spoilers"?
10. Make a policy recommendation	
11. The policy recommendation is considered by leadership	
12. The policy recommendation is implemented	
13. Effects of implementation are determined	
14. Receive feedback on the implementation and assess policy for possible adjustment	

TABLE 1. THE NSPP POLICY FORMULATION MODEL

THE ISSUE AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT: "HOW SHOULD THE U.S. RESPOND...?"

As 1950 approached, President Truman faced a number of serious dilemmas and faced them on a number of fronts. Internationally, the Soviet Union seemed to be everywhere on the march. China had fallen to Mao Zedong. Domestically, Truman was faced with an unfriendly Congress which actively opposed his social reform programs (the "Fair Deal") and had begun hearings on the "un-American activities" of members of his administration. Within the administration, there was sharp disagreement regarding U.S. commitment abroad, the "red

scare" began to make its effects felt, and the Defense Department was forced to work within the constraints of a severe "austerity budget."

INTERNATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The five years following the end of World War II saw the United States involved in an escalating conflict with the Soviet Union. By 1950, an "iron curtain" had descended and divided Europe into two camps: the U.S.-led NATO (established in 1948, the U.S. joined in 1949) West and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact (established shortly thereafter) East. During this period, the U.S. went to the aid of Greece and Turkey against Communist insurgents (the "Truman Doctrine"), kept Berlin alive during an 11-month, Soviet blockade, began to consider implementation of a strategy of containment (a Eurocentric strategy which was presented to Truman in April 1950 as NSC 68 and whose ideas were presented to Congress in July),³ and instituted an ambitious aid program for European reconstruction (the "European Recovery Program" (ERP), or "Marshall Plan").

Instead of getting better, things for Truman seemed to be getting worse. In September 1949, the U.S. public was shocked to learn that the U.S. monopoly on nuclear warfare was over: the Soviet Union announced that it had conducted its first, successful atomic bomb test.⁴ And one month later, Chinese Communists under Mao end the long, Chinese civil war when they decisively defeat the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-Shek. Having pushed Chiang off the mainland and onto Formosa, Mao continued to consolidate his power. In February 1950, the People's Republic of China (PRC) signed a friendship and mutual defense treaty with the USSR.⁵

In March, 1950, partly as a result of the arrest in England of Soviet spy Klaus Fuchs and a growing concern over the West's growing inability to contain communism, Truman made what was arguably the second hardest decision of his presidency and authorized development of the hydrogen bomb.⁶

REGIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

By the end of 1948, the Korean peninsula had become divided into two camps of sworn enemies: a Communist-controlled north under Kim Il Sung and an American-assisted south under Syngman Rhee. Under orders from Stalin to boycott Korea-wide elections, Kim does not allow the north to vote, thereby causing the U.N. to recognize the South Korean government as the lawful government in Korea.⁷

As sworn enemies, both regimes were set on destroying the other. Kim accused Rhee of inciting rebellion by sending raids into the north.⁸ Kim countered by sponsoring an aggressive,

bloody, and brutal insurgency in the south.⁹ It took several years to put down, but by June 1950, South Korean forces were able to do so.¹⁰

During the years immediately following the end of World War II, the U.S. was busy trying to figure out just what it wanted from Korea. In mid-1945, a proto-interagency group, the "State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC) was established to guide U.S. post-war policy in Korea.¹¹ Almost immediately, the War Department (pre-reorganization of the national defense organs) recommended withdrawal from Korea. However, Truman and the State Department felt it was important to remain, at least for the time being.¹² Korea was very important to the U.S. Seeing a pattern of in the on-going Soviet recalcitrance, Truman declared in July 1946 that Korea was an "ideological battleground on which our entire success in Asia depends."¹³ However, in early 1947, sickened by the squabbles and political maneuverings of the various Korean political groups, the SWNCC recommended withdrawing from the peninsula. In September of the same year, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) took up the recommendation and assessed the U.S. had little interest in maintaining a military presence in Korea.¹⁴ In April 1948, the National Security Council (NSC) also recommended withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea and by the end of 1949, all U.S. troops had been removed from the Korean peninsula (with the exception of the 500-man Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) under the control of the State Department).¹⁵ Despite the acknowledged threat posed by North Korea (reinforced by several, military incursions into South Korea), the U.S. consciously decided (partly to prove the U.S. was pursuing a non-aggressive policy and out of fear Rhee would use an army to attack the North) not to arm South Korea with anything more than a viable internal security force (which the policymakers believed would be sufficient to deter any further North Korean attacks).¹⁶ Declared to be the "best damn army outside of the United States," the South Korean security forces consisted of eight light infantry divisions armed primarily with U.S.-made M-1 Garand rifles. While the South Koreans also had five battalions of artillery (junked, U.S. M-3 105mm howitzers), it had no air force to speak of, no tanks, no recoilless rifles, and no mortars.¹⁷

In late 1948, Stalin was able to get a hold of NSC 48 which stated the U.S. defense perimeter excluded the Asian mainland.¹⁸ In March 1949, General Douglas MacArthur publicly confirmed NSC 48 by stating that Korea lay outside of the U.S. security perimeter,¹⁹ though he privately promised President Rhee he would personally guarantee Korea's security.²⁰ Considering MacArthur's plan for defending his area of operations directed U.S. forces to withdraw from Korea and concede it lost, how he would have kept his promise to Rhee is something worth contemplating.²¹ In January 1950, Secretary of State Acheson delivered a speech to the National Press Association which affirmed MacArthur's statement and added that

the U.S. would not guarantee the security of any part of the Asian mainland.²² That same month, the U.S. House of Representatives rejected Truman's Korean Aid Bill.²³ Up until the day of the attack, U.S. policy toward the defense of South Korea rested on two pillars: direct, U.S. military aid (but only to the level outlined in NSC 8/2) and United Nations recognition.²⁴

In mid-June 1950, John Foster Dulles, an unofficial representative of Secretary Acheson, told the Korean National Assembly that the South Korean people did not stand alone.²⁵ This possibly signaled a change in U.S. policy for Korea. Stated earlier, it might have dissuaded North Korea from attacking. However, by this time, the North Korean assault plan had already received approval from both Peking and Moscow (unbeknownst to the U.S.) and was already in its early stages of implementation.

DOMESTIC CONSIDERATIONS

In 1947, Truman reorganized the military with the signing of the National Security Act. In 1948, Truman continued his reform of the Defense Department with the issuance of "Executive Order 9981" (orders the end to racial integration in the Armed Forces).

In the 1948 presidential election, Truman won a now-famous, narrow victory over New York governor Thomas Dewey. Having won the presidency outright, Truman continued to press forward on a domestic agenda. He announced his "Fair Deal" program in the January 1949 State of the Union address, but had little luck pushing his agenda through Congress (though the Democrats controlled Congress, Republicans and anti-civil rights, southern Democrats (the "Dixiecrats") banded together to halt Truman's agenda).²⁶ Truman was more successful pushing through a more aggressive foreign policy. Through a byzantine combination of circumstances,²⁷ Truman was eventually able to gain a general consensus with Congress to increase the Defense budget (July 1950), but initially, Congress only reluctantly embraced containment.²⁸ Truman did, however, have to pay a price for Republican support: in order to put the "bi" back in "bipartisan foreign policy," Truman and Acheson are forced to agree to bring on staunch Republican and Dewey ally John Foster Dulles as a "special assistant to the Secretary of State."

By 1950, a "red scare" had already begun to sweep the nation.²⁹ Seeking political advantage, anti-administration forces (among them Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin), loudly and aggressively blamed Truman for the loss of China and levied accusations at the State Department for harboring known or former communist agents.³⁰

By 1950, the military began to show the strains of the continued lack of funding. Senior administration officials began to question whether the military was capable of fighting and they

had good reason to have such fears. As a result of Truman's belt-tightening, austerity budget, the military had been reduced almost ninety percent from a World War II high of approximately twelve million men under arms to 1.5 million.

The decisions taken in the previous five years by the Truman administration regarding defense expenditures were not made in a willy-nilly fashion. Truman and his senior advisors had a plan and in late 1945 set out to implement it. Broadly speaking, Truman understood the U.S. war deficit had to be brought down if the economy was to transition smoothly back to a peacetime arrangement without fear of a return to recession. Though the Soviet Union had a mighty military machine and relations had taken several steps backward, the U.S. had a small, but growing, inventory of A-bombs and that was thought to be enough to buy time for the U.S. to recover from the World War II without having to maintain a large and unaffordable military. In any event, the U.S. public would have nothing to do with a large military, and what military existed was not expected to be pushed too hard.³¹

The low funding of the Defense budget forced a move toward a national defense policy which relied on a stripped-down navy of 671 ships to project power and an atomically-armed air force consisting of forty-eight wings (of which eighteen comprised the A-bomb delivery force of the Strategic Air Command).³² The newly-formed Air Force no longer saw a great need for fighters or ground support aircraft; instead it concentrated on building an atomic weapons-carrying, jet bomber force. The Navy reduced as well, not to levels as austere as the Army, but much lower than thought prudent by many critics. The Marine Corps was also reduced from a war-time high of 480,000 to 86,000 men.³³

Relying on atomic weapons, the U.S. did not consider the possibility of a "brushfire war."³⁴ And since ground troops were becoming irrelevant to the kind of war everyone believed was obsolete, the budget knife cut long and deep into the Army's force structure.³⁵ The Army was reduced to 10 divisions (five divisions in a general reserve in the United States, one division in Germany, and four divisions in Japan³⁶), a European Constabulary, and 7 regimental combat teams. Except for one European-based RCT, all units were manned and equipped at the sixty five - seventy percent level. In short, the Army was a "paper tiger" and, according to Army General Matthew Ridgway, "in a state of shameful unreadiness."³⁷ Manned at no more than two-thirds strength (and often at half-strength) by a small cadre of veterans and a sizeable majority of draftees, the Army's equipment was World War II-vintage, heavily-used, and not being replaced. Budgetary restrictions (and other, more pleasant distractions for occupation-duty soldiers in Europe and Japan) made field training a secondary priority.³⁸ In the FEC, MacArthur's assigned military strength was insufficient to defend the area assigned to him (even

before Korea was reassigned to him) – not only was the authorization too low, he had only approximately fifty percent of his command's authorization.³⁹

Eventually, Acheson and company gained President Truman's support regarding NSC 68.⁴⁰ This would eventually be a welcome change for the Pentagon for NSC 68 envisioned a tripling of the Defense budget from thirteen billion dollars annually to forty billion.⁴¹ An agreement was reached with Congress to expand the Defense budget (mid-Summer 1950), but it came much too late to have any effect when the North Koreans attacked.⁴²

ASSUMPTIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

Public declarations by members of the Truman administration (and others as noted above) about the U.S. security stance in Asia contrasted sharply with their private deliberations. Not privy to the secret discussions, public opposition (led, for instance, by the Hearst, McCormick, and Scripps-Howard owned newspapers) sharply criticized what it saw as a soft stand by the administration on communists both abroad and within the U.S. government.⁴³ Acheson was a special target of Truman's opponents. Forced to take Dulles aboard, "the State Department became a hostage of the Republicans."⁴⁴ Friction within the senior ranks of State developed. Disagreements within the Department of Defense (for example, the Joint Staff versus MacArthur) also caused friction. Taking stock of his presidency and not liking what he saw, Truman came to the decision in April 1950 that he would not run for the Presidency in 1952.⁴⁵ And as spring 1950 turned to summer, the administration was unsure of and undecided about its Asian security policy.

As best as can be determined, these are the assumptions made by the Joint Staff at the time of the North Korean invasion:

- Europe was the primary U.S. security concern.⁴⁶ In early 1950, the State Department believed the likelihood of war with the Soviet Union had dramatically increased. Despite the fall of China to the Communists, the focal point of U.S. – Soviet rivalry remained Europe: thus, the U.S. would defend Europe. The Joint Staff recommended to Truman, via Defense Secretary Louis Johnson, that West Germany be rearmed and relations with Franco (Spain) be established. Truman initially rejected both ideas as "militaristic" and repellent.⁴⁷
- Asia, though important, was a secondary theater; Korea was of no consequence.⁴⁸ The U.S. would defend Japan, the Philippines, and Formosa, but would concede the Asian mainland (except French-held Southeast Asia) to the Soviet Union and/or China. Though the U.S. desired a unified Korea under the leadership of a democratically-elected and oriented government, the Joint Staff assumed Korea would

fend for itself (over strong State Department objections). MacArthur was thus relieved of his responsibility to defend Korea in June 1949. The Joint Staff further recommended to Truman that Korea would be too costly to defend and an inappropriate base from which to launch operations in the event of a major Asian war (which it did not think likely).⁴⁹ As a result, contingency plans for a U.S. response in Korea were never prepared.

- South Korea was not threatened with invasion. Intelligence estimates refuted the notion that South Korea was threatened by an all-out North Korean invasion at any time in the near future (despite previous events to the contrary). This contradicted intelligence gathered in late 1949 which pointed to a North Korean invasion in March or April, 1950.⁵⁰ Seeing no support from the Soviet Union and a Communist China which needed to reorganize and regroup, these reports were discounted. Seeming to confirm the Pentagon's assessment, in May 1950, the U.S. embassy in Seoul cabled Washington that an invasion was unlikely. In the main, U.S. policymakers were concerned about the Korean situation, but they believed there would be sufficient time to contemplate further action if it was required.⁵¹ By mid-June 1950, new intelligence reports pointed to a North Korean buildup, but once again, the reports are either discounted or not properly disseminated.⁵² North Korea had launched two heavily-armed "reconnaissance in force" attacks in 1949.⁵³ These attacks apparently did nothing to convince the U.S. the North had aggressive intentions toward the South.
- In the event of invasion (though unlikely), the South Korean security forces would be capable of defeating the North Korean forces. Despite a complete disadvantage in tanks and aircraft, Pentagon planners assumed South Korea could defeat any invasion from the North (so long as North Korea did not receive additional support from the Soviet Union or Red China, which was deemed unlikely).
- In the event of invasion (though unlikely), any invasion in Korea would be a diversionary attack encouraged by the Soviet Union as a prelude to a main effort elsewhere (most likely, Europe) or an attack by Chinese Communists on Formosa or in Indochina.⁵⁴ Given Stalin's increased aggressiveness in Europe, it was generally assumed that Korea would be a sideshow. As such, due to limited resources, the Pentagon preferred to concentrate its forces elsewhere.⁵⁵
- In the event of invasion (though unlikely), U.S. support of South Korea would not include the use of atomic weapons. While A-bombs were envisioned as a key component of U.S. security policy, the concern was that there were not enough of

them. Thus, what existed was reserved for use in Europe (or, at least, in theaters other than Korea).

U.S. NATIONAL INTERESTS AT STAKE; DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Initially, Truman did not see Korea as important to the U.S. national security posture. In fact, a U.S. presence in South Korea appeared to be a detriment to containing the Soviet Union as it would drain military forces better used elsewhere. The U.S. military of the late 1940s was stretched very thin. As mentioned earlier, though a decision was reached in early 1950, the time it would take to put the new money to use meant no relief would be in immediate sight. Truman sincerely believed he was being fiscally sound by keeping the Defense budget low and concentrating what political capital he had left toward domestic programs. He believed he had achieved a reasonable balance in meeting national security requirements by sending the bulk of U.S. assistance to Europe (Marshall Plan and Mutual Defense Assistance Program) and by keeping a close eye on the security of French Indochina and Formosa.

By June, 1950, reacting to the gathering momentum of the Republican, Congressional opposition (led by, among others, McCarthy), Truman began to see the possibility of an invasion of South Korea as a threat to national security (and thus, to the credibility of his administration).⁵⁶

Domestically, the U.S. public seemed caught between two, seemingly contradictory issues. Scared there was something to McCarthy's Senate hearings, fear of Communist expansion seemed to seize the nation. What was Truman going to do, they asked? However, caught up in the euphoria of a relatively robust economy, the U.S. public preferred to concentrate efforts on the home front and wanted no part of fighting Communism on the far reaches. Thus, Truman was caught in a no-win scenario: expected to do something about the "red menace," the President found he had limited resources and little support.

STRATEGIC ENDSTATE, OPERATIONAL ENDSTATE

Communist (specifically, Soviet) expansion had to be contained. The loss of China to Mao's Communists, though unfortunate, was irreversible. Prior to the invasion, no further expansion of communism in Europe or Southeast Asia was to be allowed (to include Formosa). Once the attack was underway, the decision to hold Korea was made and thus, added to the area into which the U.S. would not allow further communist expansion.

Almost immediately, two clear, operational endstates emerged: first, the North Korean military had to be pushed back to pre-invasion borders (38th parallel); and second, the U.S. wanted to ensure a secure South Korea under United Nations protection.

DEVELOPMENT OF POLICY OPTIONS

Despite clear warnings of North Korean intentions, the attack on the South took the U.S. government by complete surprise. Truman had gone to Missouri, Acheson to his farm in Maryland, Secretary of the Army Johnson and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Bradley were in Tokyo conferring with MacArthur, and the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Warren Austin, was at his home in Vermont.⁵⁷ So when a cable from the U.S. Ambassador to Korea, John Muccio, alerted Washington to the attack, the initial group which began taking stock of the situation was basically a “deputies team.”⁵⁸ However, the team was constrained in what they could do and to whom they could speak. Restrictions placed on the Defense Department by Secretary Johnson regarding inter-departmental communication with State made initial coordination difficult. Thus, having found out about the attack, in addition to bringing Truman up to speed, Acheson asked Truman to tell Secretary of the Army Frank Pace that he expected the two departments would begin immediately to work together.⁵⁹

As stated earlier, due to a lack of prior contingency planning and thus, options, the Defense Department had to concede the lead to State. Acheson wasted no time making some initial recommendations. First, he requested Truman immediately return to Washington. Second, he suggested the U.S. ask for an immediate convening of the United Nations Security Council. Third, he recommended that Truman’s senior advisors meet with the President at Blair House on the following day. Truman agreed fully.

The priority of tasks during the initial hours of the crisis (again, it is important to remember that the posture adopted by the U.S. government regarding Korea allowed for little room to maneuver) was: first, continue to gather information about the attack (its direction and scope, as well as potential greater purpose); second, get action underway in the United Nations condemning the attack and rallying allies; third, provide initial planning guidance to MacArthur; and fourth, gather the national leadership.

By Sunday morning, the first follow-up reports began to come in. Ambassador Muccio asked for State Department concurrence to release additional ammunition from U.S. stocks in Japan for immediate use by the South Koreans. Shortly thereafter, a second cable from Muccio stated that North Korean aircraft had begun strafing Kimpo Airfield. This was significant because Kimpo was to be used by the U.S. for the American evacuation from Korea. MacArthur’s first estimate also arrived. Sent by his intelligence chief, General Charles Willoughby, the report told of the approach of North Korean tanks to Seoul and that they were in the vicinity of the U.S. embassy. Willoughby added that the evacuation of U.S. personnel would begin the next day.

The most important cable of the morning (at least in terms of helping to add to the greater strategic picture) came from a senior member in the U.S. embassy in Moscow, Walworth Barbour.⁶⁰ Barbour stated plainly that the North Korean attack was an all-out offensive and part of a greater Soviet plan to threaten U.S. global leadership and assist Soviet plans for expansion. What caused him to make this assessment is not clear, but it fed into the assumptions of Truman's advisors.

Finally, Acheson received a message from Dulles (still in Tokyo) which stated while it would be preferable for the South Koreans to turn back the attack without direct U.S. intervention, the situation was not yet clear enough to determine if that was possible.⁶¹ Regardless, the U.S. could not let South Korea be overrun. Dulles believed the loss of Korea would start a chain of events which would lead to a world war.⁶²

On Sunday afternoon (June 25, 1950, Eastern time), the U.N. Security Council met and passed a resolution demanding an immediate cease-fire and a return of North Korean forces to positions above the 38th Parallel.⁶³ This opened a diplomatic offensive designed to put world opinion on the side of the U.S. and against North Korea and its backers (specifically, the Soviet Union).

As the first weekend wound on, the State Department was able to draft initial guidance for MacArthur and gain the Defense Department's tentative concurrence. The guidance was transmitted to MacArthur with the understanding by all concerned that the guidance did not have Truman's approval. That would not come until after a meeting of the president with his principals which was scheduled for that evening at Blair House. The initial (and unapproved) guidance consisted of four points.⁶⁴

- Material asked for by Ambassador Muccio was to be released immediately (regardless of any restrictions then in place);
- Korea was to be reassigned to MacArthur's area of responsibility;
- U.S. forces (principally naval and air force) may be used to secure Kimpo and vicinity to allow for the safe evacuation of U.S. personnel;
- MacArthur should be prepared to use forces at his disposal (to include the 7th Fleet) to halt the North Korean attack and restore the 38th Parallel.

Truman and his advisors gathered for dinner that evening to discuss a course of action. It is important to note here that there was not going to be any discussion of whether the U.S. was going to be involved for Truman had already decided that was to be the course of action.⁶⁵ Truman, during his flight back from Independence, Missouri, came to a firm conclusion: the U.S. was "going to let them [the North Koreans] have it."⁶⁶ Truman's decision was taken unilaterally,

but it was not something that should have surprised his advisors. Truman perceived that weakness in the face of the North Korean attack would undermine his administration and he refused to have his administration tagged with the “Munich 1938” label.⁶⁷ Truman also felt the reputation of the United Nations was at stake.⁶⁸ Thus, the evening’s discussion focused on what the U.S. would do and not on if the U.S. would do anything.

The Barbour and Dulles telegrams appear to have been central in formulating the initial U.S. response. Both served to stiffen Truman’s resolve. The military, fearing the attack was a prelude to a bigger attack against Formosa or, more likely, Europe, would only consent to air and naval operations and did not want MacArthur’s ground forces engaged. In the end, the initial guidance provided earlier in the day to MacArthur stood as it was originally written with one exception: instead of sending the 7th Fleet to Korea, it would steam to the Straits of Formosa with the mission of preventing both the Communists and the Nationalists from taking advantage of the situation.⁶⁹ Shortly thereafter, Truman approved the addition of four more points:⁷⁰

- The U.S. would immediately increase aid to Indochina;
- MacArthur was ordered to send a survey team to Korea to assess the situation;
- The Air Force was directed to plan (but not take action) for the destruction of Soviet air bases in the Far East;
- The Department of Defense was tasked to determine where the next strike would occur (it is perhaps interesting to note that Truman did not task the Army Staff to begin planning for the introduction of ground forces to Korea if the situation continued to deteriorate. Being good soldiers, the Army followed orders).

By Monday (June 27 in Korea, June 26 in Washington, DC), in response to reports that the South Koreans were in dire straits, Acheson proposed new guidance. Acheson asked Truman to approve U.S. Air Force and Navy direct action against North Korean forces⁷¹ and, still fearing another attack elsewhere in Asia, the reinforcement of the Philippines.⁷²

By the end of June, it became clear the South Koreans could not stop the North Korean attack. MacArthur had personally surveyed the scene and asked permission to bring two of the four army divisions under his command to Korea to begin ground operations against the invaders.⁷³ Within several days, his request for the release of his remaining two divisions was approved and brought the number engaged to four.⁷⁴ Within several more weeks, the number of U.S. divisions requested would double again to eight.

In retrospect, it is quite clear the decisions and pronouncements made earlier by U.S. policymakers left the U.S. with virtually no policy options once combat was underway. With

atomic weapons already off the table and the Pentagon waiting to see if this was a prelude to another, bigger attack, Truman did not have much to offer MacArthur.⁷⁵ Thus, MacArthur's choice of options was limited to one: slow down the North Korean attack in the hope that the situation would stabilize (it did not) and/or become clearer (it did).⁷⁶ Only after policymakers became relatively certain the North Korean attack was not a prelude to a main offensive in Europe or against Formosa were additional forces committed.⁷⁷ However, in the interim, it had become clear South Korea would fall without U.S. intervention on the ground, so MacArthur did the only thing he could: delay for time by trading space until U.S. resources could be mobilized and brought to the fight.

SIZING UP THE POLICY OPTIONS: RISK ASSESSMENTS AND SPOILERS

When the President leaves you with only one course of action, it is no longer necessary to determine whether it is feasible, acceptable, and suitable. Instead, you go to the fight with what you have. And while "no commander likes to commit troops piecemeal," there was really no other choice.⁷⁸

MacArthur found himself at the end of June 1950 in a situation where he faced a relatively formidable and well-trained force with troops who were in no real shape to fight.⁷⁹ As noted earlier, MacArthur's four divisions were under- and ill-equipped and manned at approximately the fifty percent level. However, even if the American units were fully-manned, fully-equipped, and highly-trained, there were no transports to get the troops to the fight.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, MacArthur had to commit U.S. troops to the fight and had to do it quickly. Perhaps the presence of American troops alongside the South Koreans would stiffen allied resolve (though privately he thought the meager display of U.S. resolve would have little effect and would be perceived for what it was: an arrogant display of strength).⁸¹ The first U.S. unit to engage the North Koreans was an infantry battalion task force of the 21st Infantry Regiment of the 24th Infantry Division under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Smith.⁸² It was every bit as unprepared and ill-equipped to fight as the South Korean army was. Smith's task force had no tanks or heavy bazookas to counter the North Korean tanks. While Smith had supporting artillery (a battery of six, light howitzers), they would prove to be of very little value (partly because the artillery was only given six rounds of anti-tank ammunition – one-third of what existed in all of Japan!).⁸³ Even the battalion's radios did not work.⁸⁴ Engaging the North Koreans approximately twenty miles south of Seoul, the Americans were handily defeated and had virtually no effect on the North Korean advance. Task Force Smith was supposed to demonstrate resolve and give spine to the allied defense. Brigadier General John Church, a staff officer in MacArthur's FEC, told Smith that what was needed was "some men up here who won't run when they see tanks."⁸⁵ But

the men did run. Having been chewed up by the North Koreans, Task Force Smith actually had the opposite effect: it lowered allied morale by its poor performance.

Truman has been criticized for his proclivity to make rash, impulsive decisions (especially when he considered an attack made on him to be a personal one). In making his initial set of decisions, Truman played to form: he decided to take on the North Koreans with very little thought of potential consequences.⁸⁶ It became incumbent on his advisors to measure risk. Basically, there were four major concerns:

- The administration was unsure of the extent the Soviet Union was involved.⁸⁷ Truman and his immediate circle of advisors were convinced Stalin was behind the attack.⁸⁸ Thus, Truman was justifiably concerned that U.S. action in Korea might escalate into a larger, direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. U.S. policy for the remainder of the war reflected this concern.⁸⁹
- The administration was unsure of Chinese intentions. Initially, Truman's advisors thought Korea was going to be used by Mao as a diversion which would allow an attack on Formosa.⁹⁰ Truman's initial decision to send the 7th Fleet to the Formosa Straits reflects this concern.⁹¹ The administration was also concerned that direct, U.S. military involvement on the Korean peninsula would cause the Communist Chinese to intervene in support of North Korea. Thus, the administration went to great pains in localizing the war. Once U.S. and United Nations ground forces were committed, U.S. policymakers believed not going above the 38th Parallel would keep the Chinese out.⁹²
- The U.S. Congress could have been a spoiler at the outset, and became a huge spoiler later on. Truman paid virtually no attention to courting favor with Congress, believing that he had the authority to commit U.S. military force in Korea without congressional approval.⁹³ Initially, this was not a problem as Congress overwhelmingly supported Truman's decision to intervene.⁹⁴ However, as the war ground on and became less of an action against "bandits" (as Truman initially labeled the North Koreans⁹⁵) and more of a war (which eventually involved the Chinese), Congress turned on Truman.⁹⁶ Expecting Truman to confer, Congress was disappointed. Thus, while not a "spoiler" at the outset, Congress became a huge "spoiler" later on.⁹⁷
- The U.S. public was a potential "spoiler." As with Congress, the U.S. public initially supported Truman's decisions and overwhelmingly so.⁹⁸ But that approval came with a price: the public was unwilling to return to the austerity conditions of World War II. The U.S. was finally in a period of increased, economic prosperity and was also

extremely averse to either increased taxes or a return to mandatory selective service.

This too would later cause Truman great difficulty: inflation returned, taxes were raised, and the public felt the pinch of shortages in a number of areas.

Regarding "second and third order effects," it is possible the overwhelming support enjoyed by the Truman administration at the outset became its undoing later on. There were few, if any, dissenting opinions in the early days of the war and this appears to have removed the need for introspection within the administration.⁹⁹ But it was very clear to Truman and his advisors that a failure of the U.S. to intervene would put the fledgling NATO structure at risk. U.S. resolve in Korea did have the effect of strengthening NATO. It was also a turning point in the conduct of the Cold War: the U.S. would now expand containment from keeping the Soviets at bay in Europe to a global defense of Communism.¹⁰⁰

RECOMMENDING A POLICY

Decisions made by the Truman administration in the years running up to the Korean War meant that there were only two, realistic options Truman could choose: intervene from a position of gross weakness or not intervene. Frankly, considering the posture of U.S. military forces at the time, it would not have been irresponsible to suggest nonintervention was the best course. However, as stated earlier, Truman took that option off the table before discussions even began. In the end, no one had to come up with or make policy recommendations; it was only necessary to figure out how to implement the policy Truman had unilaterally decided upon.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is a tribute to American bravery and determination on the ground that MacArthur was able to stop the North Korean attack and restore the pre-war borders within the space of a little more than three months.

However, it will be argued for a long time (as critics did at the time) that Truman created the very conditions which caused the predicament he faced on that June morning. Certainly, historians will argue about the political, economic, and international realities which caused Truman to make the decisions he did during his presidency leading up to the war. What will be more difficult to discuss is the culture within the Department of Defense at that time which caused planners to be reluctant to consider options for a possible military operation on the Korean peninsula. It would be uncharitable to call the leadership of the U.S. armed forces at that time (most of whom performed deeds of great renown in World War II) incompetent. A more charitable explanation is that the military service culture of the time did not allow for consideration of a land war in Korea. Further, the U.S. had been seduced by the great success of World War II, by a belief that any future war would be World War III, and by the comfort the

atomic umbrella provided. Nevertheless, the situation that U.S. policymakers found themselves in late June 1950 and the subsequent decision to defend Korea pointedly prove the need for rational, organized, contingency planning. Korea was not some off-the-wall scenario. Thus, for the purposes of this national security policy course, Korea is an excellent example of what was not done properly, and of what should never be allowed to happen again.

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ENDNOTES

¹ John Toland, *In Mortal Combat: Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991), 58.

² Stolberg's "policy formulation model," a work in progress, was developed for use by the War College "National Security Policy Program" fellows; hence, "NSPP."

³ Robert J. Donovan. *Nemesis: Truman and Johnson in the Coils of War in Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 77.

⁴ Toland, 72. Initially dismissed by Truman and Johnson as a "laboratory accident," the successful Soviet test had a profound effect on Acheson. He saw this as a pivotal event and cause for a new look at the U.S. approach to its foreign, security policy.

⁵ Toland, 73. Ironically, it appears, according to Toland, that the U.S. totally misread the meaning of this pact. He states that Stalin did not want a friendship treating with Communist China and that he mistrusted both Mao Zedong and revolutions that he did not have control over.

⁶ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 77.

⁷ Toland, 17

⁸ Carter Malkasian. *The Korean War, 1950-1953* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2001), 16. In launching the North Korean attack, Kim used this as his *casus belli*.

⁹ William Stueck. *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 68.

¹⁰ James F. Schnabel. *United States Army in the Korean War – Policy and Direction: The First Year* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1990), 38.

¹¹ T.R. Fehrenbach. *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1994), 18.

¹² Donovan, *Nemesis*, 16.

¹³ Toland, 16.

¹⁴ Fehrenbach, 30.

¹⁵ Fehrenbach, 7.

¹⁶ Fehrenbach, 7. The rationale behind the decision concerning the composition of the Korean security force can be found in NSC 8/2.

¹⁷ Fehrenbach, 7.

¹⁸ Stueck, 73.

¹⁹ Henry Kissinger. *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 475.

²⁰ Schnabel, 28.

²¹ Schnabel, 49.

²² Malkasian, 15.

²³ Malkasian, 15. The vote was reversed the next month, but the message seemed to be clear to Kim Il Sung.

²⁴ Robert J. Donovan. *The Presidency of Harry S Truman, 1949-1953: Tumultuous Years* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), 179.

²⁵ Schnabel, 40.

²⁶ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 3.

²⁷ Benjamin O. Fordham. *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy, 1949-1951* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 9.

²⁸ Kissinger, 474.

²⁹ Burton I. Kaufman. *The Korean Conflict* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 8.

³⁰ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 162. The opening salvo was fired by McCarthy in a speech in West Virginia on February 10, 1950 and followed up by a telegram to Truman the next day. Truman and aides did not initially take the accusations seriously. However, the North Korean invasion added credence to the accusations and by the end of June, Truman was fighting a war on both the Korean front and in the domestic polls.

³¹ Fehrenbach, 66.

³² Russell F. Weigley. *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 382.

³³ Toland, 71.

³⁴ Fehrenbach, 30.

³⁵ Fehrenbach, 68.

³⁶ Fehrenbach, 101. The U.S. Army divisions in Japan were the 24th Infantry Division, the 25th Infantry Division, the 1st Cavalry Division (Infantry), and the 7th Infantry Division.

³⁷ Toland, 72.

³⁸ Fehrenbach, 66.

³⁹ Schnabel, 52.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, Truman approved NSC 68 and its requisite increase in defense funding against the objections of Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson and the Joint Staff (led by General Omar Bradley)

⁴¹ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 77.

⁴² Donovan. *Nemesis*, 19.

⁴³ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 165.

⁴⁴ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 168.

⁴⁵ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 172. Fearing a “lame duck” presidency, Truman did not make his decision public until the 1952 campaign season began.

⁴⁶ Schnabel, 41.

⁴⁷ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 178.

⁴⁸ George C. Mitchell, *Matthew B. Ridgway: Soldier, Statesman, Scholar, Citizen* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2002), 49.

⁴⁹ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 17.

⁵⁰ Schnabel, 63.

⁵¹ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 182.

⁵² Toland, 23.

⁵³ Schnabel, 38.

⁵⁴ Stueck, 79.

⁵⁵ Toland, 32.

⁵⁶ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 36.

⁵⁷ Dean Acheson. *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), 402.

⁵⁸ Toland, 29.

⁵⁹ Acheson, 404.

⁶⁰ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 193.

⁶¹ Acheson, 407.

⁶² Toland, 34.

⁶³ Toland, 36.

⁶⁴ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 195.

⁶⁵ Arnold A. Offner. *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 371.

⁶⁶ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 46.

⁶⁷ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 36.

⁶⁸ Truman later came to see that his stance regarding the defense of South Korea actually served the positive, political purpose of taking the wind out of the Republicans' collective sails. This advantage did not last long.

⁶⁹ Malkasian, 17.

⁷⁰ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 199.

⁷¹ Toland, 42.

⁷² Acheson, 408.

⁷³ Stueck, 81.

⁷⁴ Toland, 88.

⁷⁵ Kissinger, 477.

⁷⁶ Kaufman, 7.

⁷⁷ Malkasian, 17.

⁷⁸ Fehrenbach, 65. Attributed to Major General William Dean, Commander of the U.S. 24th Infantry Division.

⁷⁹ Toland, 23.

⁸⁰ Fehrenbach, 65.

⁸¹ Fehrenbach, 65.

⁸² Fehrenbach, 65.

⁸³ Fehrenbach, 66.

⁸⁴ Fehrenbach, 70.

⁸⁵ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 53.

⁸⁶ Offner, 380.

⁸⁷ Toland, 35.

⁸⁸ Kaufman, 113. Access to Soviet documents now makes clear that Stalin was only cautiously enthusiastic. He supported the attack only after receiving Kim II Sung's assurance that it would take no more than 3 days.

⁸⁹ Acheson, 405.

⁹⁰ Kaufman, 7. U.S. officials were right to see a Chinese Communist threat on Formosa. Kim's insistence on launching an attack on the South may very well have been the diversion which redirected Mao's attention away from Formosa.

⁹¹ Kaufman, 132.

⁹² Kaufman, 97. Recent scholarship in Chinese archives shows that this assumption on the part of U.S. officials was incorrect. Though no documents definitively show Mao was looking for a fight with the U.S., there is sufficient, circumstantial evidence Mao did desire a direct showdown well before the U.N. forces crossed the 38th Parallel.

⁹³ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 53.

⁹⁴ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 209.

⁹⁵ Donovan. *Nemesis*, 53.

⁹⁶ Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 219.

⁹⁷ Fordham, 121.

⁹⁸ Offner, 377.

⁹⁹ Donovan, *Nemesis*, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Kaufman, 131.

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